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ABSTRACT

A needs assessment questionnaire was designed to assess the practical and psychological needs of mature women returning to college, and to compare these needs with those of returning men and traditional-age students. Demographic characteristics of the different groups were also examined. It is shown that the average returning woman is an upper-middle-class woman with a family, typically works few or no hours at a paid job, and has been away from school for at least several years; the average returning man, in contrast, is younger, less financially secure, married, but without children, has had a shorter break in his education, and works more hours at a paid job. Despite demographic differences, there were few differences in needs between the returning women and the other student groups, and the hypotheses of different needs of actual returning students versus those of potential returning students and of diverse subgroups of returning women were explored. Results of the study are described in terms of their implications for campus services and the evaluation of programs. It is noted that returning women as a group seem more involved in university life than returning men, who are more involved with paid jobs, and that the campus programs and services need to be tailored differently for the two groups. (Author/LBH)

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A COMPARISON OF THE NEEDS OF RETURNING
AND TRADITIONAL STUDENTS BY SEX

Deborah Hazel Johnson, Karen L. Weiss and
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Summary

A needs assessment questionnaire was designed to assess the practical and psychological needs of mature women returning to college, and to compare these needs with those of returning men and traditional-age students. Demographic characteristics of the different groups were also examined. The average returning woman is an upper-middle-class woman with a family, typically works few or no hours at a paid job, and has been away from school for at least several years; the average returning man, in contrast, is younger, less financially secure, married, but without children, has had a shorter break in his education, and works more hours at a paid job. Despite demographic differences, there were few differences in needs between the returning women and the other student groups, and the hypotheses of different needs of actual returning students versus those of potential returning students and of diverse subgroups of returning women were explored. Results of the study are described in terms of their implications for campus services and the evaluation of programs.

During the past two decades, college enrollment patterns have shifted as more nontraditional students have entered colleges and universities. One of the largest subgroups of such nontraditional students has been that of returning mature women, or women over the age of 25, who have returned to college after being away from the formal education process for at least one year. Surveys by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (Women's Bureau, 1974) show a dramatic increase in the number of such women attending colleges and universities between 1960 and 1972: In 1960, 171,000 women between the ages of 25 and 34 were college students, while there were 627,000 such women in 1972. By 1975, Women's Bureau statistics¹ show that 1,561,000 women, 25 and over, were attending colleges and universities.

The mass media have begun calling public attention to this large influx of returning women students. *The Wall Street Journal* (Elsner, 1972) pointed out that increased affluence and changing roles of women have encouraged American women to seek further education, and several colleges and universities have helped these women by developing special programs to aid their return to school. Both the *Wall Street Journal* article and one in the *Washington Post* (Becker, 1976) described the successfulness of these returning women as students, most of whom are very serious about their studies and receive higher-than-average grades.

While many returning women seem to do very well academically once in school, the decision to attend college and the adjustment to life as a student may be particularly difficult. Self (1969) described some psychological traits which often characterize normal, middle-class housewives: lack of confidence, pervasive depression, and difficulties in establishing a personal identity. These characteristics often lead to real conflicts when the women consider leaving the housewife role to return to

¹Personal communication, Velma Guillard, Women's Bureau, U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1977.

school, with resulting concerns centering around guilt, dependency/independence conflicts, and intimacy concerns. Because of the sometimes overwhelming nature of these feelings, the woman beginning to return to school often has distinct psychological and practical needs which distinguish her from her younger classmates (Brandenberg, 1974). The returning woman may need psychological support from others to help overcome her lack of self-confidence and the resistance to her new role from family and friends. She may lack the necessary abilities to assert herself and to make decisions in the school situation. She may encounter difficulties in overcoming the guilt and isolation arising from deviation from the traditional housewife role. Several practical needs may also make increased demands on the returning woman: child care, financial aid, and vocational counseling (Brandenberg, 1974).

Despite articles and media attention given to returning women, there is a surprising absence of data regarding the needs of returning women, particularly as compared to other students. The University of Maryland, College Park, has begun an extensive program for returning women. The purpose of this study was to provide an assessment of the needs of returning women as compared to returnmen and traditional students.

Method

Two hundred undergraduate students at the University of Maryland, College Park, were randomly selected for participation in the study, fifty from each of the following populations: (a) returning women (RW) (undergraduate women, age 25 or older); (b) returning men (RM) (undergraduate men, age 25 or over); (c) traditional women students (TW) (undergraduate women, ages 18 through 24); and (d) traditional men students (TM) (undergraduate men, ages 18 through 24).

Participants were mailed a questionnaire concerning demographic characteristics and a variety of psychological and program or service needs. Follow-up

postcards and telephone calls resulted in a return rate of 76% for the returning women, 52% for the returning men, 66% for the traditional women, and 74% for the traditional men.

Results

Aside from percentages and frequencies, subgroup responses were compared using chi square and analysis of variance. The following descriptions of results will focus on the characteristics of the returning women (RW), as compared to returning men (RM) and traditional students (TS). All differences noted are significant at the .05 level.

The average age of the RW was 31, older than the typical RM age of 25 or 26. There was a wide range of ages of RW, with the oldest being 52. Three-fourths of the RW were married, as compared to half of the RM and none of the TS; half the RW and one-fourth of the RM had children. The RW tended to have more children than the RM, and the RW's children had a wider range of ages than did those of the RM, whose children tended to be pre-school age. The typical spouse of the RW was well educated, with about 20% at the doctorate or professional level; RM's spouses were not quite so well educated, with the typical spouse having had some college. The family income of RW was higher than that of RM, with most RW having a family income of over \$20,000. Residences differed according to subgroups: most RW lived in houses; most RM, in apartments; and TS in dormitories. While most RW and many RM lived with spouses, a sizable number of RM lived with roommates or alone, and TS typically lived with roommates. More of the RW and RM were upperclass students than were the TS, and about one third of the RW were special students or uncertain of their class status.

The RW and RM had a much wider variation in the number of credit hours of current enrollment than did the TS, and tended to take fewer hours (more frequently were part-time students), with 20% of the RW taking three or fewer

hours. The RM worked more hours per week at a paid job than did the RW; one-fourth of the RM worked 40 or more hours each week, while one-half of the RW did not work at a paid job. More of the RM worked at a paid job than did the TS. All the RW and most of the RM had been away from school for more than a year between educational experiences, while none of the TS had had such an educational break. The RW had taken larger breaks than did the RM, with the average RW having been away from school for six years, and the RW's breaks ranged up to 27 years. RM, in contrast, had typically been away from school for one to four years. Both RW and RM averaged four to five semesters of current continuous enrollment in college. There was a wide range for both RW and RM in the number of semester hours accumulated before the present enrollment, with the average returning student reporting about 60 accumulated semester hours before returning to school.

Four of the 67 items dealing with practical or psychological needs showed significant differences between subgroups. Regarding interest in developing friendships on campus, RW were least interested in establishing such friendships, and RW were relatively uninterested compared to TS, with a large variance in responses. While TS had little interest in University-sponsored child care, RM had more need and RW had the greatest need for such a service. RW were more interested in a lounge for returning students than were RM, but again there was considerable (but not significant) variance in the RW's responses. When questioned whether they returned to school for personal fulfillment, RW agreed with this statement more than did the RM.

The other non-demographic items did not differentiate between the subgroups of students. Those items included questions on psychological issues such as independence, self-confidence, competence, and interpersonal relationships. Questions regarding practical needs included a long list of programs

and services both for the general student and specifically for the returning student. Programs included various types of counseling, job placement, study skills workshops, housing, social activities, groups for students in multiple roles, returning student publications, and orientation programs for returning students.

Compared to their needs for other programs, returning students had relatively high needs (although not significantly different from those of traditional students) for financial aid, advisement concerning major and course selection, educational/vocational counseling, credit by examination and credit for life experiences, and a campus information and referral service for returning students. About half of the returning students wanted additional courses or degree programs added to the regular academic selection.

Discussion

The results of the present study show many demographic differences between returning women, returning men, traditional women and traditional men. The average returning woman is an upper-middle-class woman with a family, typically works few or no hours at a paid job, and has been away from school for at least several years; the average returning man, in contrast, is younger, less financially secure, married but without children, has had a shorter break in his education, and works more hours at a paid job. While these composite pictures portray the average returning woman as a quite settled, upper-middle-class family woman and the returning man as a young, struggling married man (perhaps a veteran), there is wide variation for both subgroups on the demographic items.

Given these differences in background characteristics, one would expect to find many differences in psychological and practical needs. Those differences which did occur showed the returning woman's concern with family, identity, and

personal fulfillment. However, it is possible that these items showing differences were significant due only to chance, since such a large number of items were used. According to Sakoda, Cohen and Beall (1954), about seven of the 67 needs items would be expected to be significant by chance. Thus, in general, the present study did not show the needs of returning women to differ from those of traditional students.

Why were so few differences found, when both demographic and theoretical descriptions indicate that such differences should exist? One hypothesis is that, indeed, no such differences exist, particularly for the present population of returning women. These women have been able to arrange their lives to return to school, and, in fact, may have been successful; perhaps this success indicates needs not unlike those of the traditional student. It remains quite possible that many women would have liked to return to college, but were unable to do so because of needs not met by the existing University services. If the number of such students is to continue to increase, it is important to assess the needs of potential returning students in addition to those students successful in returning to college.

A second hypothesis to consider is that wide variation within the returning student groups mask possible differences of various returning student subgroups. Thus, it may be that the returning student is not a cohesive population, but several different types of students, some of which may differ from traditional students. While the present study was not designed to study this hypothesis, the data were examined in a *post hoc* fashion to generate relevant hypotheses for future studies. Because returning women were the focus of the present study, an intercorrelation matrix using all items was obtained, using RW data only. Many significant correlations between items were found, and an informal clustering of intercorrelated items lend support to the hypothesis of

differing subgroups. One set of items which were intercorrelated describe an older family woman, who is quite unsure of herself, and needs help with her changing identity and practical family problems such as family counseling and child care. Another cluster of items indicate the subgroup of the working woman: she tends to be independent, career-oriented, mobile, well-educated, and uninterested in being helped, but needs to have more academic programs relevant to her career. The third informal subgroup is the woman with a less educated spouse; this woman seems to be moving from a less college-oriented background, going to school to learn a career skill, has less psychological and practical support at home, and thus needs help from the University in terms of support groups, financial aid, housing and practical assistance in course advisement and job placement. It must be emphasized that these subgroups are not statistically confirmed, they are presented only to suggest that such different subgroups may exist within the returning women population and that practical and psychological needs of returning women may depend upon their age, marital status, socio-economic status and work status.

Programs planned for returning women have often considered this population to be homogeneous. One recent study (Weiss, in press) of programs for returning women found no effect of two different programs on the academic or personal functioning of the participants; it was concluded that one variable necessary to control in such program evaluation is the heterogeneity of needs and characteristics of subjects. If, indeed, subgroups of returning women do exist, programs designed for the stereotypical returning woman will not meet the needs of other subgroups. Further studies should empirically investigate the existence of different groups of returning women, and if such groups are found, colleges and universities must be prepared to offer diverse services directed specifically at the different subgroups. The need to do research before hastily generating programs and services is strongly supported by this study.

The limitation of the small return rate of the returning men is interesting. Follow-up phone calls to non respondents found returning women to be very interested in the study and quite cooperative. Returning men, however, were often not at home, had moved, were no longer students, did not actually live at the listed address, or said they were too busy to respond. This parallels questionnaire data on the different life styles of returning men and returning women. Returning women as a group seem to be more involved in University life than returning men, who are more involved with paid jobs. It is important, therefore, to tailor campus programs and services differently for these two groups. Returning men may have less time and less interest in special activities than returning women, but these men may need some rearranging of classes and office hours in order to accommodate their own work schedules.

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